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El Salvador: A Test Issue

U.S. to Use Purported Soviet-Bloc Aid to Leftists As Barometer for Policies of Allies and Kremlin

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 13 — The Reagan Administration has decided to make what it sees as Soviet-bloc support for El Salvador's insurgents an early test of relations with both its allies and the Soviet Union.

News Analysis — The decision and the background for it have yet to be officially announced, but in coming days and weeks the Administration will be making known, first to foreign governments, then to Congress and the public, the intelligence data that it says

will show conclusively that the Soviet Union, Vietnam, Cuba and other bloc countries have secretly aided the left-wing guerrillas trying to overthrow the Government in El Salvador.

It is not possible to evaluate independently the Administration's case in the absence of the secret intelligence information. But what is clear is that the Reagan Administration — pushed on this issue by Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr. — has chosen to bring El Salvador to the forefront of world attention and to make attitudes toward the guerrilla war there an early barometer of relations with the United States.

In particular, Mr. Haig is said to see the Salvadoran situation as giving form to the complaints he has been making about Soviet "expansionism" and Soviet violations of "an international code of conduct" that he says the Russians agreed to at the 1972 summit meeting but have violated since then.

Since taking office, Reagan Administration officials have talked of the importance of "linkage" in relations with the Soviet Union. Now there is a concrete issue to "link" to future arms control talks, aides said, and that is El Salvador.

The Administration is sending missions to Latin America and Europe this weekend and plans a "white paper" to give details of its charges of Soviet, Cuban and Vietnamese involvement in the guerrilla war. [Page 6.]

These moves show a kind of parallel to the energy with which President Kennedy attacked Cuba's meddling in other countries and Soviet support for the Communists in Laos and Vietnam.

In the early 1960's, the United States tried to coax and coerce American friends around the world to respond as actively to the perceived threats as the United States was doing. The United States succeeded in isolating Cuba within the hemisphere, but the concerns about Indochina eventually produced direct American military involvement there.

The possibility that El Salvador could become another Vietnam has been a source of concern for allies of the United States. Yesterday, Mr. Haig, in a meeting with Foreign Minister Emilio Colombo of Italy, said, "We're not going to be

dragged into another Vietnam, but the problems will be dealt with at the source of the difficulty."

That statement suggests a willingness by the United States to confront what it says is Communist involvement in El Salvador or in places other than El Salvador. But officials sought to discourage speculation about blockades and other actions. They said the purpose of Mr. Haig's comment was to assure Mr. Colombo that the United States did not intend to use its own forces in El Salvador.

Mixed Response Expected

The campaign over El Salvador has some major risks for the Reagan Administration. Inevitably it will provoke a debate about the quality of the intelligence information, particularly on the degree of Soviet involvement in the guerrilla war.

The concern of the Administration about El Salvador will probably produce

mixed responses in Europe and Latin America. Many allied leaders, like the Italian Foreign Minister, might temper their support for the firm line in Washington with insistence that the United States also show readiness to resume political discussions with the Soviet Union soon.

Mr. Haig has affirmed the American agreement to discuss mutual missile-force reductions in Europe with the Russians, in keeping with the allied decision of December 1979 to deploy new generations of missiles there.

But the impression being created by the Administration is that such arms control talks must await a more conciliatory attitude by the Russians. In Mr. Haig's words, the Soviet Union should agree to adhere to an "international code of conduct."

Mr. Haig's spokesman said today that "we will proceed with improvement of our defense capabilities and we intend to conduct our relations with the Soviet Union on the basis of reciprocity and restraint."

Officials suggested that Washington would watch closely, for example, what the Russians did in Poland and Afghanistan and whether Cuban troops began to leave Angola and Ethiopia.

As to the "code of conduct," officials said that they did not know whether Mr. Haig intended to press for Soviet reaffirmation of the 1972 document or for agreement on a new one. The 1972 document, known as "The Basic Principles of Relations," was signed in Moscow by President Nixon and Leonid I. Brezhnev, the Soviet leader.

It said that both sides agreed that "efforts to obtain unilateral advantage at the expense of the other, directly or indirectly, are inconsistent with these objectives."